

VZCZCXR08535

PP RUEHBC RUEHKUK RUEHMOS
DE RUEHLB #0647/01 0650658

ZNY SSSSS ZZH

P 060658Z MAR 06

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2320

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RHMFIS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000647

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/SINGH/WERNER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/05/2026

TAGS: PREL PGOV KDEM LE SY

SUBJECT: MGLE01: ALL IN THE (FIRST) FAMILY: LAHOUD
THREATENS SON-IN-LAW AFTER MURR'S CABINET INTERVENTION

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) In a 3/3 meeting with the Ambassador, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr said that he had been threatened by his father-in-law, President Emile Lahoud, in front of friends and relatives over dinner the previous evening. Lahoud, according to Murr, ordered Murr to recant publicly his 3/1 cabinet intervention, in which Murr -- asking that Lahoud do something to make his grandchildren proud -- told the president he should resign. Murr refused to withdraw his statement, and Lahoud warned Murr that he will "see what we can do to you." While he broke down into tears at one point in recounting the story, Murr felt that Lahoud's theatrics were intended for Hizballah and Syrian ears as much as for his. Even First Lady Andree Lahoud got into the act, attacking Murr for hurting Lahoud. Murr countered that it was Lahoud's allies, the Syrians and Hizballah, who were behind the 7/12/05 car bomb that nearly killed Murr. When Murr stormed out of the dinner, Lahoud ordered Murr's wife Karine to stay behind. Murr described Lahoud as having no decency left and said that he did not expect to be reconciled with either his father-in-law or his wife. Citing the fact that the Syrians seem to have tabled the names of three possible replacements for Lahoud, Murr also thought that even the Syrians were ready to see Lahoud resign. End summary.

SHAMING LAHOUD AT THE CABINET

¶2. (C) Back in his Ministry of Defense office after several weeks overseas for further treatment of his injuries, Murr recounted for the Ambassador his 3/1 intervention in the weekly cabinet session asking his father-in-law, Emile Lahoud, to resign the presidency. Murr spoke last, after a series of ministerial speakers all attacked Lahoud. Murr said that he pointedly noted that none of Lahoud's so-called allies in the cabinet -- the five Shia ministers, Minister of Justice Charles Rizk, Minister of Environment Yaccoub Sarraf -- came to Lahoud's rescue. "They pretend to be your friends, but they are not," Murr quoted himself as saying. Lahoud was left without a single defender. For his coup de grace, Murr invoked family pride, saying that he wanted his children to be proud of their grandfather for at least one thing. And that one thing would be resignation, as soon as possible.

A DINNER INVITATION HE COULD NOT REFUSE

¶3. (C) Asked by the Ambassador for his father-in-law's reaction to an intervention that made front-page headlines the following day, Murr said that Lahoud had stared at him "with a stupid grin" on his face, as if the president could not fathom what was happening to him. The following day (3/2), Lahoud called to invite him to dinner at a villa Lahoud owns. Saying that "I had to go," Murr accepted without knowing whether Lahoud was attempting a reconciliation at the family level or setting up a venue to launch a counterattack. When Murr arrived from the office, he discovered that the other guests included First Lady Andree Lahoud, the Lahouds' son Ralf and Ralf's fiancee, previous Constitutional Court judge Salim Jeresseiti and his wife Nada, and Murr's wife Karine.

HURT FEELINGS, AND A CALL TO RECANT

¶4. (C) Murr said that he knew something was up when everyone fell silent as Lahoud started speaking to Murr over cocktails. "He rehearsed his lines before I got there," Murr insisted. Lahoud started by talking about how much Murr had hurt his feelings and hurt the family. No matter what the political differences, the family should show unity to the outside. Now, "you've broken me in two," Murr reported Lahoud as saying. Andree Lahoud then rebuked Murr, shouting that Murr had no idea how much the president had suffered because of Murr.

¶5. (C) Lahoud then handed a cell phone to Murr, ordering him to call his press advisor to ask him to issue a press release in Murr's name. Murr was to denounce his cabinet statement and express full confidence in Lahoud. Lahoud told Murr to tell the press that he supported Lahoud remaining in

BEIRUT 00000647 002 OF 003

office until the end of his term. Murr refused. Rising from his chair, Lahoud shouted that Murr had forgotten that he had done for Murr, how Murr would be nothing if it weren't for Lahoud.

MURR CITES SOLIDARITY
WITH OTHER BOMBING VICTIMS

¶6. (C) Murr said that he responded by accusing his father-in-law of ignoring the fact that his closest allies -- Syria and Hizballah -- had been responsible for the car bomb attack against Murr. "You accuse me of being March 14 (anti-Lahoud forces), when you think I should be with March 8 (pro-Syria forces). I am not with March 14 or March 8. Instead, I am with the forces of October 1 (attack against Marwan Hamadeh), February 14 (Hariri murder), June 2 (Samir Kassir's murder), June 21 (George Hawi's murder), and September 25 (May Chidiac's attack)." When Murr started to storm out of the house, Lahoud shouted that, if he didn't recant his cabinet testimony immediately, Murr will "see what we can do to you." When Karine stood up to join her departing husband, Lahoud shouted at her to stay, which she did.

LESS PHYSICAL THREAT THAN SIGNAL TO SYRIA

¶7. (C) Asked by the Ambassador whether Lahoud was implying a physical threat, Murr said that he assumed Lahoud's words were intended to be reported back to Syria and Hizballah, to show that Lahoud is trying to punish Murr for his apostasy. He did not expect physical harm, although "I can't rule that out entirely." He said that his father-in-law had stationed soldiers prominently near the doors of the salon, probably to ensure that "they heard and reported every word." Jeresseiti, too, would tell the Syrians, Murr said; "he's their guy."

¶8. (C) Murr mused that Lahoud had probably meant to

humiliate Murr in front of the soldiers in order to discredit him at the Ministry of Defense. But Murr thought that he had comported himself well, which only added to Lahoud's frustration and anger. Breaking down momentarily, Murr said that he thought his father-in-law would, however, succeed in breaking up his marriage, already rocky, completely. "That man ruins everything," Murr said. "He has no decency." Murr said that he did not expect that he would be reconciled with either his father-in-law or his wife.

SYRIANS SIGNALING LAHOUD MIGHT GO

¶ 9. (S) Murr said that he calculated that Lahoud would be forced out "within three months" as even the Syrians have tired of him. Murr cited the rumors, which he thought credible, that the Syrians have used former Minister of Health (and Asad family gynecologist) Karam Karam to float three names as potential Lahoud replacements: Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, Minister of Justice Charles Rizk, and former Minister (and happy gourmand) Michel Edde. That the Syrians have moved into the "name game," in Murr's view, means that the end of Lahoud's tenure is rapidly approaching.

The specific names, he said, are less interesting than the fact that the Syrians seem to be contemplating the post-Lahoud period.

COMMENT

¶ 10. (S) Murr is a self-promoter who has on-again/off-again relationship with the truth. He is inclined (like most of us, actually) to give a version of events that puts him in the most favorable light. His pride in his 3/1 cabinet statement, however, is well-justified. His shaming of Lahoud, witnessed by the entire cabinet, was the strongest call yet for a change in the presidency, coming from a son-in-law who was once heavily invested in the Syrian occupation of Lebanon and who only miraculously survived, and with heavy injuries, the car bomb attack intended to kill him. Given the corruption and party-boss machinations of the Murr family, Elias will never entirely transcend his past. But it is that very past -- with the mafia-like connections between the Lahouds, Murrs, and Syria -- that makes his denunciations of Lahoud and break with the Syrians so politically and symbolically powerful.

BEIRUT 00000647 003 OF 003

¶ 11. (S) As for the dinner encounter between Lahoud and Murr, Ghattas Khoury recounted for the Ambassador on 3/4 the version told by Salim Jeresseiti. It featured a more benevolent Lahoud, begging for family reconciliation for the sake of his grandchildren, and a more rabid Murr. But the basic outlines of the story were the same, including Lahoud's threat and Murr's identification with all the bomb attack victims since October 1, 2004.

FELTMAN